

marie claire WORLD WRAP

HONG KONG

The Help

It's not surprising that Hong Kong feels like home to **Evangeline Vallejos**. She has spent the past 26 years working 15 hours a day, six days a week in the Chinese territory. But, unlike Western businesswomen, Vallejos is not allowed to call Hong Kong home. She is one of nearly 300,000 domestic workers, mainly from the Philippines and Indonesia, who are denied the right to live in the city permanently.

For the past two years, Vallejos, a motherly Filipina with long dark hair, has been at the centre of a fraught legal battle to reverse this injustice. Most expats who live in Hong Kong for seven consecutive years can apply to become permanent residents – a status that allows them to stay indefinitely, and receive welfare services and the right to vote. But the city's vast army of low-paid Asian maids is ineligible, regardless of how long they've worked in the city.

Vallejos, who is now 60 and hopes to spend her retirement in the territory, filed a suit against the Hong Kong government in September 2010. The initial ruling was positive: last September, a lower court judge ▶

Hong Kong foreign domestic workers protest for their equal rights to residency. Right: the maids, mainly from Indonesia and the Philippines, gather in public spaces each Sunday – their only day off in the week.

© AFP/PALANI MOHAN



ruled that domestic workers should be afforded the same rights of abode as other foreigners. But the euphoria was short-lived. The government appealed and, in March this year, a High Court judge quashed the decision.

Domestic worker Eni Lestari, Hong Kong spokesperson for the Asian Migrants' Coordinating Body, says the latest ruling is a crushing disappointment for all foreign domestic helpers. "We deserve to be allowed to settle here," says Lestari, an Indonesian in her 30s. "Our labour helps to keep this entire city and its economy running smoothly."

The wealthy territory of seven million people is one of the most maid-heavy cities in the world. About one in six households employ full-time help. They are paid a statutory minimum wage, currently \$HKD3740 (\$480) per month – a lot less than the minimum wage set for native Hong Kongers. During the week the maids are largely invisible, toiling away inside the city's glittering skyscraper apartments and taking care of children. On Sundays, their one day off, they famously gather in their thousands in public spaces to socialise, eat picnics, and provide support to one another over work rights and abuses.

While the odds seem stacked against them, Hong Kong's domestic workers are refusing to give up the battle. In addition to Vallejos's hearing in the Court of Final Appeal later this year, at least two other long-term domestic helpers are also filing suits to be granted permanent residency. Mark Daly, a Hong Kong-based lawyer helping represent the workers, says treating maids as "second-class citizens" is unjust. "People in Hong Kong should be proud to have people like Ms Vallejos as permanent residents."

STONE ACCUSED

Alleged mistreatment of domestic workers isn't confined to Hong Kong. In May, Erlinda Elemen, a Filipina nanny who worked for actress Sharon Stone (left), filed a suit, claiming she was "subjected to derogatory comments and [racial] slurs". Stone refutes this.



AUSTRALIA

Iron Lady

Mining magnate **Gina Rinehart** (above) is officially the world's richest woman, according to the latest rankings in *BRW* magazine (though international lists sometimes have her pipped to the post by Walmart heiresses Alice and Christy Walton).

Her vast empire is on track to increase exponentially, and it's more than probable that she'll one day be the world's richest person. Currently, the Western Australian is thought to be worth \$29 billion. In fact, according to experts, if the resource boom continues, Rinehart could well be Australia's first \$100 billion woman.

WHAT COULD RINEHART DO WITH HER COOL \$29 BILLION?

Eliminate malaria (and get \$25.8 billion back in change).*

Cost.....\$3.2 billion

Wipe out the student loans owed to the government (and have \$7 billion left).

Cost.....\$22 billion

Pay off the entire external debts of the South Pacific (excluding Australia and New Zealand) and have enough left over to make Bangladesh debt-free.

Cost.....\$29 billion

The contraception carousel

WHO WANTS IT, WHO CAN'T GET IT, AND WHO WANTS IT BANNED

WORLDWIDE In what is considered to be one of the most radical and far-reaching efforts to eradicate poverty and improve the quality of life of women

globally, philanthropist

Melinda Gates has

pledged to put her

economic muscle

behind extensive

family planning

initiatives in the

developing world. The Gates Foundation, which she founded with husband Bill in 2000, has pledged to raise the \$4 billion needed to give 120 million women access to contraceptives by 2020. The move will see a marked decrease in maternal and infant deaths, as well as improve the living conditions for families. Remarkably, Gates is a practising Catholic, and she agonised over the decision to push for something that conflicted with the teachings of her faith.



Melinda and Bill Gates are helping to improve the quality of life of women globally.



Scan the pic of Melinda and Bill Gates (far left) to watch her inspiring TEDx talk. See page 198 for instructions.